

## [Two Irish Granite Workers]

1

19855

Miss Mary Tomasi

63 Barre St.

Montpelier, Vt. The Granite Worker

### TWO IRISH GRANITE WORKERS

Occasionally a breeze stirred to movement the scrubby, dusty growth on Quarry Hill. For the most part there was stillness. Stillness of motion: clouds transfixed in a weighted, humid air. Stillness of sound: the [quarrymen?] from neighboring pits had finished their day's work and were gone. Silence, except for some bird-call shrilling its echo across the chasms of abandoned quarries. Sun blazed on the granite blocks jutting from the quarry rim. They encrusted the gaping mouth like hard old sores. It was a heavy heat. It pressed a hotness in rock and earth, gave it up again in shimmering, muggy waves. Deep down, the cragged mouth held a motionless pool of water. Green in the sunlight. Green-cool in the shade of slanting granite walls.

A motor broke the stillness. A car was climbing the hills. It coiled a trail of dust around the lower hill, close lying like sluggish mist. Two men, one in a bathing suit, stepped from the car. They were stonecutters. C[?] 3[??]

"I went home to change," the one in the bathing suit said. They were both young, in their forties. "If I'd put my work clothes on again after going in swimming, I'd feel worse than I do now. I know. I've tried it before. The dust from the clothes gets on to your wet skin and sticks there like a paste. 2 "We come up here a lot in the summer when it's real hot. The

## Library of Congress

only trouble is we like to go home first and change. No, not to Barre, to Websterville. A bunch of kids from Websterville used to come up here to swim. Their folks have tried to put a stop to it. It's dangerous. There was a boy drowned up here last year. His father worked beside me in the shed. I'll never forget his face when a neighbor came in and told him. His face went dead-white, and all he could do was stand there stiff as a poker and say over and over, 'Jim. Little Jim.' His eyes were hard and almost popping out of his head. The hammer slipped from his hands and chipped the stone he was working on. Sure, it was spoiled. No one ever said anything to him. I guess he doesn't know to this day. No, the boy hadn't been swimming. He was just a baby. Not quite five years old. He and his playmates came up to watch the older crowd swim. They were playing around at the edge. He fell over the side. Dashed from one sharp rock to another, and finally landed in the pool there at the bottom. He must have been killed instantly. His back was broken and his hip, and I don't know how many more bones. No, it's strange, - his face wasn't even bruised. But there was a deep, jagged cut on the back of his head, cut right through the skull. .... It's taught a lot of the kids to keep away from these old quarries.

"Have I been in the sheds long? Well, 23 years. 3 I'd call it pretty long. I started three years after I quit school. I had one year of high school, then I worked for a Barre furniture store. There was an opening in the shed where my father worked, so I went to work with him. He had come over from County Mayo, Ireland. One of my brothers was born over there. My father used to tell that most of the first Irish who came to work in the sheds settled in Websterville. There were so many of them that they used to call it New Ireland.

"My father worked in the sheds 44 years, with never a day off from sickness until he died. He was a big, husky man. He used to tell us stories of the fellows who are at the top of the granite industry today. They were just beginning to be big shots then, it kinda went to their heads. They liked to show off. Horse-racing on the ice was popular then. Yes, on the river. Anyone who had the money and liked horses owned one. Three fellows, a couple of them were from Barre and one from Montpelier, had entered their horses in a race. An Englishman, a Spaniard, and a German. Sure, I remember their names. That's

## Library of Congress

the story. They were: Henry Lord, Jesus [Aja?], and Joe Krist. Well, it was one these Irish stonecutters who got to the top in the granite business that yelled out the entries that day. He was feeling pretty good. You couldn't race horses on that river unless it was cold, and the ice thick. So the ones that could afford it - and the ones that couldn't too - used 4 to get tanked up. When the races started they were always a happy, celebrating crowd. They'd announce the names of the owners of the horses, not the names of the horses. It made it more interesting. Well, this Irishman jumped on a barrel and yelled, 'The next participants will be Lord, Jesus, Krist!'

"No, I can't say I dislike granite work. I knew what it would be when I started 23 years ago. There's no use complaining now. I don't like the idea of being laid off so often. It wasn't like that years ago. Everything was booming then, and granite more than ever. But it's slumped now. I have three kids of my own. I don't want them to learn the trade. There's no future in it, and lots of headache. I won't have to worry about that for awhile. They're still in school.

"That '22 strike is over. I guess the less said about those Frenchmen, the better. They certainly did a good job of breaking the strike. The funny part of it is that many of those same Frenchmen are still here in the sheds today, and they're as strong Union men as you would expect to find anywhere. I don't think they realized what they were doing in '22; most of them hadn't done granite work before. We've tried to forget about '22. There are Frenchmen working beside me. We never talk about it. They don't want to, and we don't want to. It had to happen, it's over with and finished now. There's no use opening an old sore. We have to work together, we might as well be friends..."